During the second full week of February, I will join with the bishops of Region XIII for our quinquennial visit ad limina apostolorum. This fancy title is ecclesiastical shorthand for the visit every residential diocesan bishop makes to Rome once every five years or so. Ad limina apostolorum is Latin for “to the thresholds of the apostles.” Specifically, it means that bishops from all over the world come to the thresholds of Saints Peter and Paul which is a figurative way of saying they come to the Vatican to visit the pope and the various departments that make up what is called the Papal Curia, or the pope’s administrative unit that assists him in governing the universal Church. During this visit, the bishops will speak with Pope Francis and with the various cardinals of the Curia to discuss matters relevant to their dioceses and to the universal Church. These visits have a rich history, dating back to 1585 when Pope Sixtus V established norms that are still followed today.

As I mentioned above, we bishops will meet with Pope Francis and then enter into discussions with the various departments, or dicasteries, of the Curia. These will include the Secretary of State, the Doctrine of the Faith, Clergy, Divine Worship, Education, Evangelization and others. During our meetings, we will discuss a variety of issues including immigration throughout the world, polarization in the Church, the persecution of Christians in the Middle East and Africa, the new evangelization, the ministry of lay ecclesial leaders, vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, the impact and implementation of Pope Francis’s Apostolic Exhortations such as Amoris Laetitia and Laudato Si’, the sexual abuse crisis, and a host of other topics. These visits ad limina provide an opportunity for our Holy Father and his Curia to learn about the Church throughout the world and it gives the visiting bishops an opportunity to focus on issues concerning the universal church.

When visiting the Holy See for these canonically required visits, I am reminded of the fact that the Archdiocese of Santa Fe is a local Church that is part of the universal Roman Catholic Church. There is a healthy tension here which is important to keep in mind. All of the local churches throughout the world comprise and form the entire Catholic Church with the pope as our universal pastor. At the same time, the pope, as Bishop of Rome, while he enjoys the Petrine Office, is one with all the bishops of the world and with them forms the magisterium, i.e., the teaching authority of the Church. Each bishop is more than simply a department manager. Rather, he is the shepherd of a local Church or diocese that is complete within itself. Each diocesan bishop, as a successor of the apostles, represents Christ who is an instrument of unity within that local church. The people of God gather around one altar with their bishop, priests, religious, and deacons form the body of Christ. As St. Ignatius of Antioch stated, “Wherever the bishop shall appear, there let the multitude of the people also be; even as wherever Jesus Christ is, there is the Catholic Church.” (Letter to the Smyrnaeans, Ch 8) In other words, where the bishop is, there is the Church. You might say the Archdiocese of Santa Fe is part of the whole and yet a whole part. And all the “whole parts” come together to form the whole Roman Catholic Church. In short, the Church is greater than the sum of its parts but the parts are not lacking in their true identity as Church.

As you might expect, when the mystery of the Church is looked at from an administrative point of view, tensions arise. Some parts of our Catholic history have tended more toward a centralized Church where Rome plays a huge part in the life of all the local Churches. At other times, subsidiarity has been emphasized as the Church has leaned toward local synods and councils to meet the needs of specific regions in the world. This tension will always exist and it should. We must never lose sight of the importance of the chair of Peter. The Pope, the Vicar of Christ on earth, is a symbol of the Church’s unity for us. And, he exercises authority in the universal church that has a direct impact on all of our Churches. At the same time, he governs in union with all the bishops, that is, all the Churches of the world. He listens to and works with them in exercising his ministry as “Servant of the Servants of God.” The administrative pendulum will always swing between centralization and subsidiarity, hopefully staying somewhere close to the...
middle.

In all of this, we seek unity. Jesus prayed fervently for unity in John’s Gospel. We are called to be one with Rome and one with our local Church. St. Paul also emphasizes this theme of unity in his writings, always convinced that the Church of Christ must be one. In his letter to the Corinthians he writes, “I appeal to you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree and that there be no dissensions among you, but that you be united in the same mind and the same judgment. For it has been reported to me by Chloe’s people that there is quarreling among you, my brethren. What I mean is that each one of you says, ‘I belong to Paul,’ or ‘I belong to Apollos,’ or ‘I belong to Peter,’ or ‘I belong to Christ.’ Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?” (1 Cor 1:10-13).

Our ad limina visit will emphasize the unity we all share with one another as we come to visit our universal pastor, Pope Francis. It is a living expression of our desire to be one as Christ is one with the Father and one in us.

Since the church is the Body of Christ, we rejoice in our unity with diversity. As one Church comprised of many local churches, we project the face of Christ to the world and we do so most effectively when we are one with each other, living in communion and charity. I will be joined by approximately 40 pilgrims on our visit to Rome this February. I ask you to pray for us as we travel to the thresholds of Saints Peter and Paul to celebrate our unity and our diversity. What a gift it is to be the people of God. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) of the second Vatican Council puts it well:

At all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right. God, however, does not make men holy and save them merely as individuals, without bond or link between one another. Rather has it pleased Him to bring men together as one people, a people which acknowledges Him in truth and serves Him in holiness [...] Christ instituted this new covenant, the new testament, that is to say, in His Blood, calling together a people made up of Jew and gentile, making them one, not according to the flesh but in the Spirit.

This was to be the new People of God. For those who believe in Christ, who are reborn not from a perishable but from an imperishable seed through the word of the living God, not from the flesh but from water and the Holy Spirit, are finally established as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people ... who in times past were not a people, but are now the people of God.”(9)

Sincerely yours in the Risen Lord,

Most Rev. John C. Wester,
Archbishop of Santa Fe